Holt vows to protect Medicare

By Lea Kahn | The Lawrence Ledger

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Lorraine Colavita considers herself "very lucky" and "very satisfied" with the U.S. government's Medicare program.

Ms. Colavita said her medical needs are great but her costs are nil, and that's why the 82-year-old Lawrence resident is opposed to changes in the Medicare program.

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But her nieces and nephews, who are in their 40s and 50s, may not be so lucky, said the lifelong Lawrence resident. She said she is concerned about possible changes — proposed by Republican legislators — that would affect them.

Jack Rowland, who is 83, said that he, too, is "extremely comfortable" with the way Medicare is being run, and the changes that are being proposed "do not sit well." He said he is concerned about his children, who are in their 50s.

Ms. Colavita and Mr. Rowland were among more than two dozen Lawrence residents who listened to U.S. Rep. Rush Holt discuss the Medicare program — and possible changes to it — Wednesday morning at the Lawrence Senior Center on Darrah Lane.

The changes would affect people who are under 55 years old. They would be disqualified from participating in the traditional Medicare program, which means they would have to purchase a private insurance policy. They would be given a voucher to do so. But the changes would not affect the current crop of senior citizens, or anyone who is at least 55 years old today.

"I am here partly to reassure you that I am not going to let anything happen to Medicare as you know it now. Many seniors have told me that it works very well," said Rep. Holt, a Democrat, who represents the 12th Congressional District. The district includes Lawrence Township.

Rep. Holt offered a brief outline of the history of the Medicare program, which was enacted in 1965.

"Some of you will remember 1965," he said. "You probably had parents who went in under Medicare. Until then, you were told, 'You're on your own,' unless you could find an employer who would give you health insurance, or you had to buy your own policy. That worked for only a very few people."

In the pre-Medicare era, people who reached 65 years old had "inferior health care," Rep. Holt said. People died at a younger age, but the implementation of Medicare changed it. People began to live longer because they could expect good health care coverage, he said.

But now, there are lawmakers in Washington, D.C., who think the United States has to lower its sights, he said. They think it is not the greatest country, and that it cannot provide health care for seniors, let alone anyone else, he said.

Those lawmakers say there won't be any changes to the Medicare program for senior citizens who are already enrolled in it, Rep. Holt said, but the changes would affect people who are now 55 years old and younger.

The Medicare program's annual "wellness" visits to a physician, which took effect earlier this year, would be dropped, he said. In the past, a senior citizen would receive a free wellness checkup by a physician when he or she turned 65, but subsequent visits would require a

co-payment, he said.

Also, the proposed changes call for future senior citizens to purchase an insurance policy, Rep. Holt said. The federal government would offer a voucher to help pay for the insurance policy, but "let's hope you get the best one that suits you," he said. The country would be returning to the days when everyone was on his or her own in obtaining health care coverage, he added.

Lawmakers should not balance the federal budget by ratcheting back on spending, especially on Medicare, Rep. Holt said. The Medicare program is not wasteful, although it could be more efficient, he said.

"I am asking you to help communicate to people who are 20 or 30 or 40 years old, what Medicare means to you," Rep. Holt told the senior citizens. "You could educate them that Medicare is reliable. You don't have to negotiate with the insurance company. Medicare is there for you and you can count on it."